

Fishtales
Saturday, September 29, 2012
Working Waterfront Festival

Interviewer – Markham Starr
Interviewee – John Isaksen

JI I can't be held to everything that I say, right?

MS That's ok

JI Because I forget

MS Yup. Ok so what is your name?

JI John Isaksen

MS And how long have you been in the industry?

JI I guess I started as a kid. I guess I was 13 years old when I first went out.

MS With your father or

JI My father. Well my uncle actually. And that was just in summer vacation though of course. And we moved, we came from Norway in 1945. I was actually born in this country, but we went over there and I got stuck there during the war. So we came over in '45 and then I, over there we lived on a small island so the boat that you see on that picture way over there is me as a kid with my buddies there. We had a little boat that sunk every night. We had to bail it out in the morning.

MS Do you remember your first trip off shore?

JI Yup. I was seasick. Yeah. That was on the KATHERINE AND MARY. I think that was in 1948.

MS And trawling was it?

JI Scalloping. We used to go down and get in the way down at Kelly's. It used to be Kelly's shipyard and my uncle he was well known down there I guess and he had connections and so we used to go down there, my cousin and I and we got in everybody's way, in trouble. And we would play on the boat and then we would be put to work after we got a little older I guess we were probably eight nine years old, nine, nine or ten years old I guess. 'Cause I came here when I was nine.

MS And then were you in scalloping the whole time?

JI No I went dragging too. I went dragging with Kora Henders on the ALOAH. It was owned by the, well my father owned it with a guy by the name of Joe Golen, but they bought them out and I needed, I was in the lobster business for a few, a year I guess, and I missed the water a lot and other things, so I had, I went back at that time. And then after that I went back scalloping on the LEANDER with my future partner. And we worked together for 4 years I guess and then we bought the POSEIDON. And then after that we bought the LEANDER. And that after that we bought the, we built the LADY OF FATIMA, which used to be the HUSTLER. And then a few years ago, the government got involved and the individual boat owners weren't doing too good. It was hard and a lot of aggravation and stuff so we sold out and I still work on engines on the boats. Small engine jobs, whatever. I'm more of a consultant I think. Because they don't let me do much. But they're good to me.

MS So when you sit down and tell sea stories, what's the one that comes to mind first?

JI The differences that has happened. It's, we talk about it quite a bit. I have a coffee shop over the south yard over in Fairhaven and we get together and shoot the breeze. Now the guy, the people that used to come down there to go fishing and they would be just like a Philadelphia lawyer more or less you know, and the combinations worse than what they are today. And now the guys come down in sea boots and a garbage bag. For their clothes, you know. And I think you know, what a difference. We had a toilet, it was a bucket and that was steel until we got plastic, it was a steel bucket and that used to leave a ring around you when you got home. So big difference. And that was great. Communications. You left the port and mostly you didn't get in contact until you got back home again. 'Cause the radio and stuff is not like they are today. They have these little cell phones you know that were quite a surprise to me. We come home from fishing and I wonder how the wives knew we were coming in 'cause at the time, the government regulations were starting and we didn't want anybody to know we were coming in because they would be down counting the scallops and giving a hassle so we tried to keep it quiet. But here are all the wives and I find out they had the telephones, these, well cell phones. So that was a shock. And you know, we never got too much of a hassle.

MS How about any trips you thought you wouldn't make it back from?

JI Well all of the, we were out when the MIDNIGHT SUN went down.

MS Oh really.

JI And I was the last one to talk to 'em. It was my wife's uncle, my father in law's brother. And they were fishing together with us and they didn't give bad weather report, but he told me that the glass was dropping and he didn't, and he felt that he would start home. And then the storm hit around five o'clock, six o'clock. We were still fishing when he left. And he, we never heard from him, but we took one sea there that buried us, more or less, what you say, I'm saying burying us, 'cause it took the boat up just like a tin can and threw us on the side and filled up with water and when I got up from the water in the pilot

house and water all over the place, I looked out the pilot house window, all I see is water. You know. And I thought, uh, oh. The pilot house come off the boat I thought, you know. But then I saw the mast so I figured well the mast is there so we must be in somewheres and she came back up again and holding you know. But that was a big sea. And the thing that aggravated me more about the courts and stuff at that time. We had to go up and testify and the lawyer was telling how all seas are the same and there's no such thing as a queer sea which I said that it might of happened. We got hit by a steamer. That was [inaudible] I had only been fishing four years at the time, 3, 4 years. So I didn't know anything, but he was lying through his teeth. Not lying, he didn't know. And I think that the Deadliest Catch play these shows now what the seas are like. You know. Because we've taken a few good ones. And it's a freak wave and they do build up and boy they come big bang. So

MS What was the boat you were on when the MIDNIGHT SUN went down?

JI It was on the ALOAH.

MS She's an eastern rig or?

JI Eastern, a Schooner rig. Yeah.

MS A schooner?

JI Yeah. No schooner rig.

MS Oh. Okay.

JI Yeah she was built in 1945. Right after the war. That was my father's boat so I was on that, yup. And we took that sea and we got banged up a little bit and stuff. It was different. And one of the comments they had, the testimony from a guy that was fishing way to the west of us and he had no wind. But you know yourself in the hurricane or whatever, when the hurricane hit down in New York, it don't hit up here. But you tell him that, I wasn't allowed to say that because I was only supposed to answer yes or no. So after that my experiences with court was not a good experience. Well, I should say that I don't know but that's my feeling.

MS So what do you think was the greatest thing you ever saw at sea? What was the most memorable?

JI We had, we were fishing up on the northern edge and the CHRISTIAN RADICH they had to sail from Boston, it was the big tall ships and the CHRISTIAN RADICH came by early in the morning under full sail and she sailed by us from here oh, halfway to the tower over there, you know. I had a camera and no film. So I talked to the radio operator there and I got to talk to him and he later years, he mentioned to a friend of mine that he had talked to somebody who knew me so I got to park in her path cause she was way out in the lee because the boats kept coming by all day and late into the night and, but it

would have been something to have a picture of the CHRISTIAN RADICH going by. You know the flag, everything, it was perfect, but no film.

MS Yeah. So what was the strangest thing you ever pulled up?

JI We pulled up a, we pulled up a rocket down over Norfolk, in the area where the SNOOPY blew up. We were fishing there. And we pulled up a, fins and everything from a rocket and it was in good condition and we left it up on the whaleback forward, but I'd say it weighed about 50 or 60 pounds anyway, like I say I'm not sure. It took 2, 3 of us to carry it up there. When we got in we called the Coast Guard. And the Navy came down and picked it up in about half an hour. Apparently what they told us, it was the guidance system for these rockets. That was in the 60s. So apparently they didn't want that to get in the wrong hands I guess, you know. So that was one of the unusual things that I would say we picked up. You pick up everything. Typewriter, we had typewriters, we picked up, we had a, I don't know what it was, but we were, after the SNOOPY blew up, we were all afraid of torpedoes, so whether everybody caught torpedoes after that or not I don't know, but we were looking for them, that's for sure.

MS What is the biggest fish that ever came up? Anything unusual that way?

JI Well, we got a halibut one time dragging and I think it weighed about 160 pounds which was a pretty good, that was a strong fish. And then we caught a cod fish one time that weighed about I would say it was 6 foot long, pretty good size fish you know. That was, it weighed quite a bit. So was about the biggest fish we ever caught. That was dragging. Scalloping, I don't know, shells, if we got good scallops, big scallops we were happy. Oh we caught a stingray one time. They're pretty good size. Apparently that has a barb on the end of it. And I guess that could be poisonous. We didn't realize that so we didn't, but it was pretty well dead when we, at the time, so.

MS So this, the little boat that you had

JI That was in Norway, during the war.

MS Oh year. But did you fish out of it?

JI We set a mackerel net one time. The three boys, we were, 6, 7 years old. We set a net for mackerel off a rock out there yeah. But mostly just trolling. But they let us set, I guess we set in a good spot, you know they let us set. It had big holes in it and everything else. But we made it up ourselves and set it and we got 19 mackerel I think. So it was an experience. But you see the difference between when I go on the new boats today and the old boats, that's me taking a shower [looking at photos]. We didn't have shower. We did have a head. But we took showers out on deck underneath a salt water hose. And it itched after. You got clean, but you had an itch a little bit you know.

MS And how long were your trips in general back then?

JI Back then, when we first started, when I first started we had a quota. We had a limit, 11,000 pounds or a thousand pounds a man. And I thought that was pretty good. And the fastest trip we made was three days six hours. And that was on my father in law's boat, the NEPTUNE. And then that was, they claimed we were price fixing 'cause we weren't bringing it in. The government got involved and some people got in trouble because of it. So they said you have to stay out eight days and catch as much as you can. So that's what we did. And then after that if it was, it got to be you had to stay out ten days. So you know, what they say about us and the government, is not all, the government is now always telling the truth I don't think. I am not that keen on it because we've been out there we know what's going on and you come in and say something, oh you don't know anything because you don't have a college education. I don't have a college education. I made a living. I paid for, I paid my bills and paid my taxes and I think that's more than a lot of people these days. So I think we were kind of, at that time we were kind of, we didn't have a good reputation. When we went to, we were gonna get married, I went to buy furniture and my wife, my fiancé and I, we were building a new house, we had put down payment on that and we went and we were gonna buy a few pieces of furniture and I couldn't get credit from the store because I was a fisherman. So my wife was working at Revere Copper and Brass so she got the credit. But I couldn't get the credit. So that was, we did have, apparently, the store had been stuck by the fishing industry so we didn't have a good reputation. But I never had any more trouble after that.

MS So who was the most memorable character that you remember on the water?

JI Oh there's a bunch of them. The best guy I went fishing with I would have to say would be Pete Jacobsen. He ran the GENERAL PATTON which was brand new boat at the time and I'd never been on a new boat. The boat I had been on was these here and the main thing was to keep it afloat and then after you kept it afloat, then you could go fishing. So this was a brand new steel hulled trawler and he was a good captain. When he got ashore, he was very generous so he, but he was a good guy. He knew what he was doing. And then of course my partner and I, we fished together for many years. My dad, my father-in-law, we had guys that when I first started that were dory fishermen. I had a guy by the name of, we called him Selasi, he was, he didn't need a fog horn, he'd just holler out the window and he would scare the boats away. But he was willing to show you how to splice and how to make, rig up buoys, at the time you had to rig up buoys 'cause when we got a good tow, we set a buoy out. And how to rig the buoy up and stuff like that and splicing and splicing wire and all that kind of stuff. Like my father said, before you in the pilot house and you're gonna tell somebody what to do, you have to know what you are doing for yourself. So I had to learn how to splice and splice wire and I had to learn the engine room and this here Salasi he helped me in the pilot house a little bit. After my father-in-law took over he brought me in the pilot house and then I went back with my father in the pilot house.

MS Well thank you very much. I appreciate it.

JI Okay.